

Anna Conzatti  
**Architecture and narrative.**  
**The dialogue of time, space and man**

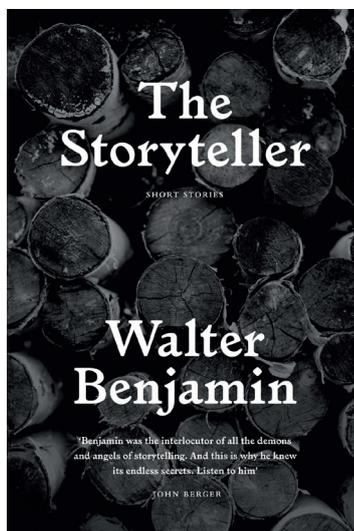
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Abstract

As the oldest way of interaction between people, narration is an archetypal form, like building, within man's daily life. The latter is enriched through the story, and it is sublimated through the spiritual experience of living space. Distant on the level of form and structure, of heaviness and impalpability, narration and architecture seem irreconcilable, but today, while in the contemporary every human experience is consumed by the speed of time, these two forms of communication find themselves investigating together the sense of time, space and human existence. Together they come to a new form of perception that goes beyond language and feeds on the sensibility of the architect, but also on the life that they are required to nourish and produce within a telling space.

Keywords

Storytelling — Time — Space



**Fig. 1**  
 Walter Benjamin (1969), *"The Storyteller"*. *Illuminations: essays and reflections*, Schocken books, New York.

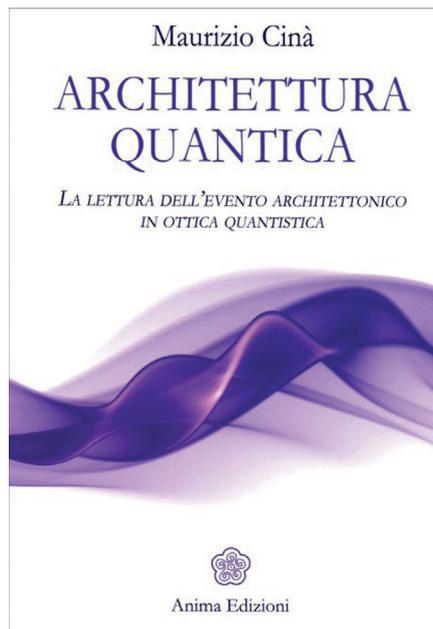
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Storytelling sometimes appears as a cynical and trendy epithet to describe the ability to tell stories typical of digital marketing. The main purpose of this strategy is the persuasion of the user, through emotional connections that try to involve the public with whom one wishes to weave a link. But it is simply a practice that has always existed, so much so that it can be defined as an archetypal form, through which human experience is expressed and charged with meaning.

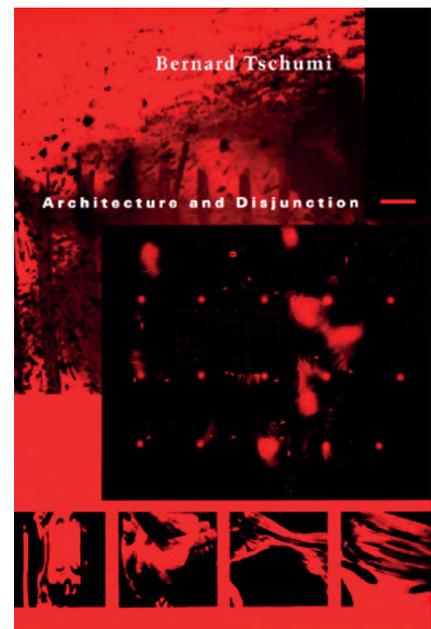
The narrative, first oral and only subsequently written, is one of the most ancient and deeply rooted practices of society. An oral art can be traced in all the populations, so much so as to be able to affirm that the will to tell stories is innate in man. This art is soon submitted in favor of the written word, governed and guided by rules not only grammatical and lexical, but structurally determined by the conventions of time, the historical and cultural context that produces it and not least by the public to whom it is addressed.

The narration is guided by metrics, vocabulary and logic, space is governed by matter, relationships and proportions. Two distant fields, the architectural and the verbal tale, which apparently remain distant and autonomous. Massive and perceptible as well as building the first one, the other metaphorical and impalpable. Just as the story lives in the words of the narrator, the same can not be said of architecture, because where the work of the architect ends, that of the users begins within the architectural space and the words are lost between the steps, between the movements, in the interpretations and through the looks of those who live and change that architecture.

But yet it is also a story. Architecture is heavy, limited in space, the story

**Fig. 2**

Maurizio Cinà (2017), *Architettura Quantica. La lettura dell'evento architettonico in ottica quantistica*, Anima edizioni, Milano.

**Fig. 3**

Bernard Tschumi (1996), *Architecture and Disjunction*, Mass: MIT Press, Cambridge.

is like air, its presence is in the mind of the listener or reader and this peculiarity makes it one and infinite stories, based on the interpretation that each subject gives. Architecture has the time of discovery, of focusing, of the moment just before and the moment just after, the story lives in the linearity of the succession of events. But just in this last dissonance, the one concerning the use and the representation of time, here is that storytelling can approach that area, which is also an *arche*, which is completed with the *tecton*.

In contemporary times the communication of the story has changed. The word, whether written or oral, is consumed quickly, and never as now becomes incipient to understand the lesson *Show do not tell*. A warning also valid for architects. Show, even before telling, “Don’t tell me the Moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”<sup>1</sup> says Chekhov. For architecture the task does not seem difficult, visual and material as it is, yet it too often turns to a different narration from that which expresses its structure, its spaces and its colors.

Storytelling is part of our communication and architecture is the same, if we consider communication as a language. Walter Benjamin himself explains how everything is a form of communication, a painting, an object, any human product is an expression of a particular form of language and the narration is one of these innumerable forms<sup>2</sup>.

Human action is the content of this communication, similar to the plot of a story and the spaces of a building. The human condition is a matter of the architect and through the story is constantly explored and taken to its ends to answer the big questions about the essence of existence.

### **The castle and the labyrinth: architecture as a metaphor**

It is no coincidence that in the expressive linguistic process, in metaphors to indicate the loss of man in front of the complexity of his condition, the architectural form of *labyrinth*<sup>3</sup> is often used. Emblematic and representative figure of contemporaneity, in the Castles of Atlas<sup>4</sup> in Ariosto (1532) is the trap that ensnares multiplying illusions, while for Calvino (1962) it is necessary to enter the labyrinth, as a challenge<sup>5</sup> for the man, who must prove to be up to the complexity of chaos and contemporary complexity. The Ligurian writer makes this figure his own, recalling a form so impor-

tant for Jorge Luis Borges (1941), that he represents through the labyrinthine library. Here we see what exists, but also what does not exist, in a multiplicity of forms and contents that amplify and reproduce reality. This architecture is the place where contemporary man moves: in the drama of his thoughts aimed at the realization of the precariousness of every action, in the vanity of every decision and the fragility of life but above all in the impossibility of freeing himself from this state. The library, in fact, does not have any way out. But it is with Joyce (1922) that the architectural metaphor of the labyrinth becomes a story and so in *Ulysses* the abandonment of traditional narrative structures is accomplished, reaching the extreme of the narrative form through the use of the flow of consciousness, dangerous and immediate, timeless in its authenticity.

The architecture then becomes first image of the story and then transmutes into the story itself, a story that takes place in its own dimension of time that, like the labyrinth, hides others, in an infinity of possibilities.

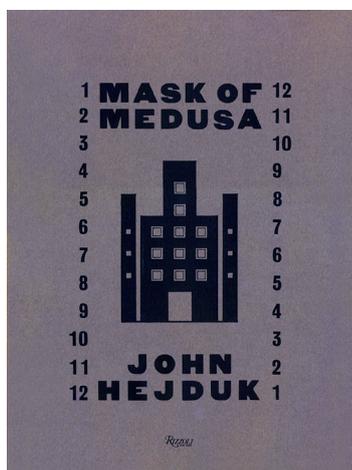
### Linearity and spatiality: time as a paradigm of words and space

It is often thought that the reading of a building is similar to that of film frames: a careful construction of points of view and events, through the manipulation of spatial experience.

In the case of architecture therefore time seems to be different from the linear one of narrative, but if attention is paid not to content, but to punctuation, narration is also a complex of pauses, moments, stops and summaries that the same user experiences discovering a building.

Architecture and storytelling face the same dichotomy: the time of the author / architect is the time of the listener / user. Often spatial manipulation of architecture risks to sacrifice individual human interpretation, even if the architect does not have complete control over his work. The timeline of events can be represented by the user experience, through the series of events that occur within the space and this is what decrees not only the immortality of the story, but also of the architecture. The spatial experience does not refer to the temporal linearity, but to the contemporaneity and in this sense John Hejduk (1985) is skilled in understanding the ability of architecture to tell the story without clinging to the linearity of space, but telling the simultaneity. His *Mask of Medusa* is a continuous and incipient emergence of stories that perpetuate and reconfigure each other, in an overlap of other stories that generate a new one. Disconnected and ambiguous elements, they become the cards of a story that is a city and as such it is a story made up of many other stories that develop outside the traditional narrative sequence.

The architectural building could be considered temporal, living a sort of dichotomy between historical time and the succession of events that characterize it, but time does not flow in one direction and in the graph of human existence the future is simultaneously fulfilled in the past. It is a sort of quantum context, that “relative to”, or relative to the one that the architecture observes and changes: the user. Maurizio Cinà clarifies this concept, defining precisely the space in which the architecture historian operates a quantum context. The decomposition of time in days, months or years of the architectural product is multidimensional and gets lost, because what matters is space, expressed in the multiplicity of forms that architecture generates thanks to those who experience and perceive this space. So to understand the close connection between narration and architectural experience, it is not enough to appeal to the succession of facts but



**Fig. 4**  
John Hejduk (1985), *Mask of medusa*, Rizzoli, New York.



**Fig. 5**  
Sophia Psarra (2009), *Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning*, Routledge, New York.

it is also necessary to address the interpretation of the observing subject that lives in space.

### **Interpretation: the secret lives of buildings**

Just as the role of the listener or of the reader is essential for a story, in the same way the presence of the viewer is important in architecture, although often his figure is put in the background compared to that of the architect and his hand. The history of an architecture is perpetually manipulated to such an extent that often its initial meaning can result in time completely overturned. It therefore undergoes an evolution that is essential for its very survival and permanence over time. The composer of the story is not as free as it seems, in the choice of the information that is given of a building, as they can modify and influence the perception of space.

The building tells the lives of men, but a little also that of the architect. Architecture is the expression of existence, expresses the time in which it is produced and tells its story together with that of its occupants, stimulating the mind and sensitivity of its users, like a narration. And it is precisely by virtue of this narration that the conjunction between the world outside our mind and that within the minds of others takes place. Storytelling thus becomes a skill in the field of architecture, aimed at enriching the space without necessarily resorting to the manipulation of the user. It concerns architecture and at the same time architecture takes the narrative techniques to focus on each scene and involve the user, in a narration that does not concern the single interpretation, but creates thoughts and spaces that adapt to each experience and to the most varied understandings. In this way it is precisely architecture that tells one, many clearer and more authentic stories, exciting the user, making him live a spiritual experience that enriches him. Just as the psychological connection of events is not forced to the reader in the same way, an architecture is ultimately interpreted by him in the way he understands it, and so generates that multiplicity that makes the building and the story perpetual in time. where man can reach or at least approach that order which is the understanding of the world; through the dissolution of *chaos*, but accepting the complexity of reality<sup>6</sup>. A complexity made just by the multiplicity of stories and narratives, in a labyrinth in which the subject should not be lost. Because, as whispered by Muriel Rukeyser<sup>7</sup>, the universe itself speaks to us, all that is in it is a story, a multiplicity of words and discourses that clash like atoms, producing the marvelous existing.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Chekhov Anton; phrase paraphrased by a letter that the Russian writer and doctor wrote to his brother in 1886, explaining his literary ambitions.

<sup>2</sup> *Language in such contexts means the tendency inherent in the subjects concerned-technology, art, justice, or religion-toward the communication of the contents of the mind. To sum up: all communication of the contents of the mind is language, communication in words being only a particular case of human language and of the justice, poetry, or whatever underlying it or founded on it.*

Benjamin Walter, a cura di R. Solmi (2014) - *Angelus Novus. Saggi e frammenti*, Einaudi; Torino.

<sup>3</sup> *In the labyrinth you will not get lost. In the labyrinth you will find yourself. In the labyrinth you will not meet the Minotaurus. In the labyrinth you will meet yourself.* From Kern Hermann (1981) - *Labirinti. Forme e interpretazioni. 5000 anni di presenza di un archetipo. Manuale e filo conduttore*, Feltrinelli, Milano.

<sup>4</sup> Ariosto Ludovico (2012) - *Orlando furioso*, BUR editore, Milano.

<sup>5</sup> Calvino Italo (1962) - *La sfida del labirinto* (essay published on *Il Menabò* n.5), Torino.

<sup>6</sup> Calvino Italo (1962) - *La sfida del labirinto* (essay published on *Il Menabò* n.5), Torino.

<sup>7</sup> *The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.*

Rukeyser Muriel (1968) - *Speed of Darkness*, Random House, New York.

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Anna Conzatti, graduated with honors from the University of Udine, in the academic year 2015-2016, with a thesis about urban regeneration applied to large residential complexes of the Seventies in Trieste, Rome and Palermo (supervisor Prof. Giovanni La Varra ). In 2017, after a volunteer stay in Tanzania, she completed studies on the phenomenon of Social Housing in Paris, Madrid and Ljubljana supported by the Ado Furlan Foundation (Pordenone) and the scholarship in memory of architect Giannino Furlan. In 2018 she won the Confartigianato Pordenone prize, as part of the international competition IRSE Europe&Youth, developing a research paper on regeneration of abandoned industrial areas as a consequence of the changes to industry and production. In the same year she presented her thesis work at the conference organized by IUVAS (Institute for Urban Variations and Architecture Systems) on the situation of peripheral areas in Italy and abroad. Writer of articles and short stories, for some years she has participated in national and international literary competitions with good results.